DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 021 PS 014 505

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TITLE Working with Children While Minimizing Parents' Unwarranted Interventions: Fathers' and Mothers' Responsiveness to Their Infant's Distress.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, May 3-5, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; *Fathers; *Infants; *Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; *Separation Anxiety; *Sex Differences; Social Experience
IDENTIFIERS *First Born; Parent Behavior; Parent Child Separation; Parent Responsiveness

ABSTRACT

Parents' reactions to brief separations from their infant children were investigated in this study. Participants included a total of 16 female and 16 male 10-month-old infants, together with their mothers and fathers. From the pool of 64 parents, one parent in each family was randomly chosen to serve as subject. The selection of subjects was made so that equal numbers of parents with first- and later-born infants and equal numbers of mothers and fathers participated. The selected parents were unaware that they had been chosen as subjects. After parents and children were separated, subjects heard cries attributable to their children and were told they could return at any time to the playroom to investigate. Time from the onset of recorded cries until the subject opened the playroom door was recorded as a primary measure of parental responsiveness or wariness. When the parent returned to the child, or after 10 minutes had elapsed, the experiment ended. The credibility of the procedure was then checked, and a questionnaire was administered. It was found that first-borns received quicker and more frequent attention from their parents than did later-born infants and that more mothers than fathers retrieved their infants. Sensitivity to infant distress was related to parents' experiences in caregiving. (Author/RH)

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PS 014505

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, IL, May 1984.

Abstract

Thirty-two mother-father-infant triads participated. From the pool of 64 parents, one parent in each family (16 mothers and 16 fathers) was randomly selected to serve as the subject for the study. After they separated from their 10-month-old infants, these parents heard cries attributable to their children. Firstborns received quicker and more frequent attention from their parents than did later-born infants. More mothers than fathers retrieved their infants. Sensitivity to infant distress was related to the parents' experiences in caregiving.

Working with Children while Minimizing Parents' Unwarranted Interventions: Fathers' and Mothers' Responsiveness to Their Infant's Distress

One of the common problems facing professionals who work with children is an overly protective, unjustifiedly wary parent. When clinical or research procedures demand separation from the child for a while, the parent may overcautiously linger near closed doors, attend to each sound, and, at the slightest noise from the child, perhaps needlessly interrupt the session to check up on the child. Even after repeated assurances from the professional and even from the child that the child is fine, the parent's cautiousness may not be relieved.

In research examining the parent-child attachment bond, the parent and child are typically separated, and then the child's subsequent behavior is observed. If the child becomes distressed, it is assumed that the child's adaptive behaviors have been disrupted because of the parent's absence. In fact, the extent of this disruption has served as a valuable way to estimate the quality and strength of the child's attachment to the parent.

Although we frequently assume that the parents are as attached to their children as the children are to their parents, in studies on the effects of separation, we usually only focus on how the child is affected. Perhaps it is time to turn the question around: Are the parents' ongoing behaviors disrupted by the absence of their child? As many child psychologists, nursery-school teachers, researchers, clinicians, and even baby sitters know, the answer is unequivocally "yes." In fact, it seems that some parents are more distressed by separation than are their children!

It is often the parent who requires soothing and attention once the child departs.

What are some of the characteristics of these wary, sometimes overly cautious parents? Is an infant's mother or father more likely to be upset by the separation? Does being separated from a son differ from being parted from a daughter? How is the parent's guarded vigilence related to whether the parent is the primary or secondary caretaker for the baby? Since some research has shown that first-born children receive more attention and caretaking than do later-borns (Jacobs & Moss, 1976; Kilbride, Johnson, & Streissguth, 1977), do parents who are experienced by having already raised another child undergo less discomfort at separation than do first-time parents? These questions are addressed in this paper.

Studies that examine children's reactions to separation often use crying as an index of behavioral disruption. According to many theoretical viewpoints, crying signals to the parent that help is needed and draws the parent closer to the child. It seems logical, then, that the amount of time a parent takes to attend to crying should be an excellent index of parental attachment or of parental responsiveness and sensitivity.

We know that crying does arouse parents. In one study, the sound of a tape-recorded cry by an unfamiliar infant caused a greater physiological reaction in parents of only children than in multiparous parents (Boukydis & Burgess, 1982). However, mothers' reactivity didnot differ from fathers' (Boukydis & Burgess, 1982; Frodi et al., 1978). But the source of the cry has to be considered. Mothers were more aroused than fathers when the cry was from a tape recording of their own infant (Wiesenfeld, Malatesta, & DeLoach, 1981). Because these studies only dealt with physiological

responsiveness to what the parents knew were prerecorded cries (that is, the parents were not required to do anything), we do not know whether the parents' physiological reactions correspond to their actual caretaking behavior.

Sixteen female and 16 male 10-month-old infants, together with both of their parents, participated in the study. When the family arrived, the members were escorted to a playroom. From the pool of 64 parents, one parent in each family was randomly chosen to serve as the subject for the study. That parent, however, was not aware of this fact. The selection of who was to serve as the subject was made so that equal numbers of parents with first-and later-born infants (and equal numbers of mothers and fathers) participated. For those participating as subjects, their ages, children's ages, socioeconomic levels, race, and durations of marriage were comparable across the different groups.

Both parents were asked to leave the playroom separately and to remain in different waiting rooms nearby while their infant stayed alone in the playroom observed by an experimenter. However, only the participating parent actually left; unknown to this parent, the nonparticipating parent always remained with the infant.

In the waiting room, the subject-parent was instructed that he or she could listen to the interactions between the infant and the experimenter through an intercom ostensibly connected to the playroom. The parent was informed that the other parent was in a different waiting room, which unfortunately, did not contain an intercom, and therefore the other parent could not hear the infant. Any time that the subject-parent wanted, he or she could return to the playroom to check up on the child.

The intercom was actually connected to a tape recorder which played a cassette tape of random white noise recorded over the cries of a one-year-old infant. The white noise, presented at 55 decibels for 10 minutes, was used to mask any distinct identifying features of the cry--to make the cry less recognizable to the subject-parent. The cry began one minute after the white noise started and continued for the remaining nine minutes.

The time from the onset of the tape recording until the parent opened the playroom door was recorded as the primary measure. When the parent returned to the child or after 10 minutes had elapsed, the experiment ended. The credibility of the procedure was then checked, and a questionnaire was administered.

The amount of time that parents delayed before attending to their baby was considered to be a measure of parental responsiveness or wariness. Parents attended to their first-borns significantly faster than to their later-born infants. Parents waited a mean of 289.8 seconds for their first-borns versus a mean of 426.9 seconds for their later-born babies, $F(1,24) = 4.83$, $p < .05$. Some parents never opened the playroom door; a frequency analysis revealed that parents were more likely to investigate the crying when the baby was their first-born rather than their later-born, X^2 $(1, N = 32) = 4.17$, $p < .05$.

Six of the eight parents who did not attempt to retrieve their baby within the 10-minute limit were fathers. A test of the difference between the proportions of mothers and fathers who opened the door was marginally significant, $z = 1.63$, $p = .0523$, and indicates that fathers were more likely than mothers to ignore their infant's cries.

In addition, information from the questionnaire was significantly related to the parents' speed of responding to the cries. The more caretaking responsibilities that the participating parents customarily performed for their infant, the faster they investigated the cries, r (30) = .400, $p < .05$. On the other hand, the sheer amount of time that they reported just being with their children was not related to opening the door, r (30) = -.16, $p > .10$. Parents also indicated the age at which their infant first appeared to recognize them. The younger the infant was perceived to be able to recognize the participating parent, the more quickly that parent opened the playroom door, r (30) = .370, $p < .05$.

Both mothers and fathers investigated the cries of their first-born infants more quickly and frequently than the cries of their later-borns. First-time parents seemed to be more uncomfortable at separation from their baby. These findings are in agreement with others that have shown that mothers generally give more attention and caretaking to their first-borns (Jacobs & Moss, 1976; Kilbride et al., 1977), and the findings extend previous work by demonstrating that fathers likewise exhibit a differential responsiveness to cries that is related to parity (cf. Lewis & Kreitzenberg, 1979).

Furthermore, the results are highly consistent with the data from physiological studies (Boukydis & Burgess, 1982). First-time parents are not only more physiologically aroused by cries than are parents of more-than-one child, but we have now shown that they also act upon the cries faster and more readily. What this means to the professional who deals with children is that crying by first-born babies arouses their parents more, and the attention given is more frequent, more contingent, and more rapid.

Interestingly, any expectations regarding differences due to the child's sex were not confirmed. That is, "Daddy's little girl" did not receive attention any faster than did "Daddy's big boy," and mothers, likewise, seemed uninfluenced by the baby's sex.

Fewer fathers than mothers intervened to help end the crying. This finding also supports some of the physiological research in which mothers' and fathers' cardiac patterns differed when they heard their baby cry (Wiesenfeld et al., 1981).

The parents' responses to the questionnaire may help us better understand why some parents returned to their baby seconds after the crying began, whereas others waited--making little or no attempt to return, even after they had listened to several minutes of crying. Speedy intervention in the laboratory was related to the amount of caretaking that parents reported that they assumed--and to the age at which the parents believed that their infant first recognized them. On the other hand, the sheer amount of time that parents spend interacting with their infant was not associated with their responsiveness to the distress. It is likely that caring for an infant--not just spending time with the baby--brings about early recognition and causes a parent to be sensitive to the baby's signals, which, in turn, would lead the parent to intervene when the infant cries.

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